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Kirk L. Thompson

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Mythcon 52: The Mythic, the Fantastic, and the Alien

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Abstract

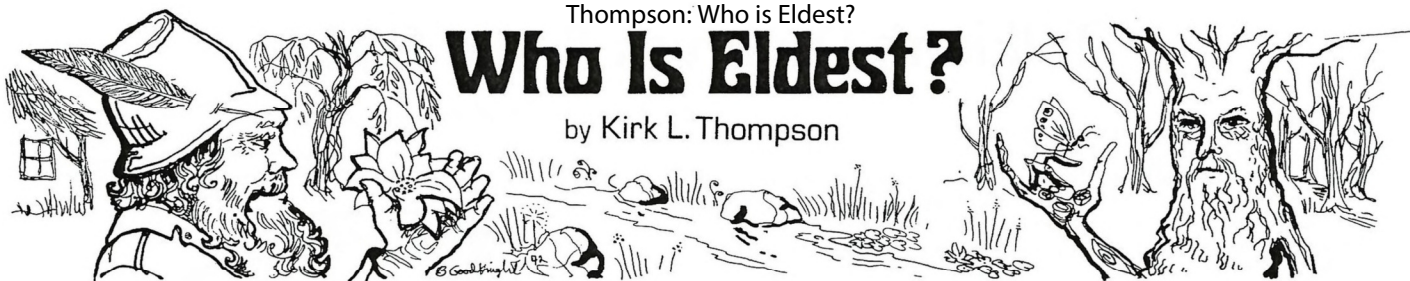
Assesses internal evidence in *The Lord of the Rings* to determine if Tom Bombadil is the eldest living creature in Middle-earth.

Additional Keywords

Tolkien, J.R.R.—Characters—Tom Bombadil

Who Is Eldest?

by Kirk L. Thompson



Tolkien Journal readers may recall a letter of Joan Biella (TJ, vol. II, no. 2, p. 14f) raising this question, and (if my memory serves me correctly) it was also voiced at Secondary Universe II. We shall here attempt to arrive at some answer, as well as to determine the order of genesis of the peoples of Middle-earth, by first reviewing the evidence in favor of the three candidates for 'eldest': Tom Bombadil, Treebeard, and the Elves. All *LotR* references are to the Ballantine edition.

Tom Bombadil:

- I. 'Eldest, that's what I am. Mark my words, my friends: Tom was here before the river and the trees; Tom remembers the first raindrop and the first acorn. He made paths before the Big People, and saw the little People arriving. He was here before the kings and the graves and the Barrow-wights. When the Elves passed westward, Tom was here already before the seas were bent. He knew the dark under the stars when it was fearless-- before the Dark Lord came from Outside.'

(I, 182)

- II. 'But I had forgotten Bombadil, if indeed this is still the same that walked the woods and hills long ago, and even then was older than the old. That was not then his name. Iarwain Ben-adar we called him, oldest and fatherless. But many another name he has since been given by other folk: Forn by the Dwarves, Orald by Northern Men, and other names beside. He is a strange creature....'

(I, 347)

Treebeard:

- I. 'Ah! now you are asking much,' said Gandalf. '...Treebeard is Fangorn, the guardian of the forest; he is the oldest of the Ents, the oldest living thing that still walks beneath the Sun upon this Middle-earth....'

(II, 131)

- II. 'It is not wizardry, but a power far older,' said Gandalf: 'a power that walked the earth, ere elf sang or hammer rang.'

Ere iron was found or tree was hewn,
When young was mountain under moon;
Ere ring was made, or wrought was woe,
It walked the forests long ago.'

(II, 189)

- III. Gandalf laughed. '...When you see Treebeard, you will learn much. For Treebeard is Fangorn, and the eldest and chief of the Ents, and when you speak with him you will hear the speech of the oldest of all living things.'

(II, 209)

- IV. And Celeborn said: 'I do not know, Eldest.'

(III, 321)

The Elves:

- I. 'Yes, you saw him for a moment as he is upon the other side: one of the mighty of the First-born....'

(I, 294)

- II. 'Never again shall there be any league of Elves and Men; for Men multiply and the First-born decrease, and the two kindreds are estranged....'

(I, 320)

- III. 'Elrond says that the two are akin, the last strongholds of the mighty woods of the Elder days, in which the First-born roamed while Men still slept....'

(II, 55)

- IV. 'Learn now the lore of Living Creatures!

First name the four, the free peoples:

Eldest of all, the elf-children;

Dwarf the delver, dark are his houses;

Ent the earthborn, old as mountains;

Man the mortal, master of horses.'

(II, 84)

There can be no disputing Bombadil's assertion, supported by Elrond, that he is eldest; however, how do we contend with the other claimants? This is the reason for exploring the order of genesis of the peoples of Middle-earth. We may start by further defining what is meant by 'eldest' when referring to the two remaining contenders: the elves are the eldest of all the free peoples, paraphrasing the Ents' old list; and Treebeard, I propose, is eldest of the Ents, only.

There is little problem supporting the ancient list of the Ents with regards to the primacy of the elves, as note the references to the First-born above. My supposition about Treebeard, however, is something else. Assuming that the arrangement of the Ents' list is chronological, at least for the enumeration of 'the free peoples,' the Ents place themselves third of four. Celeborn's statement probably indicates that the Ent is the oldest of those present on this occasion, surely older than the men, hobbits, and Gandalf, and perhaps (there being no supporting evidence) older than Celeborn, Galadriel, and Elrond. Two of Gandalf's statements (II, 131 and 209) support my interpretation of Treebeard's elderliness, that is, oldest of those living, but the third (II, 189) is a distinct stumbling block. 'A power that walked the earth, ere elf sang and hammer rang...' implies that Ents were around before elves and dwarves and is in direct conflict with Treebeard's ancient list. There is, however, a tentative solution to the problem.

This solution involves a reconstruction of the genesis of the Ents, and some interpretations of Gandalf's statement. Treebeard told Merry and Pippin (II, 90): 'Elves began it, of course, waking trees up and teaching them to speak and learning their tree-talk,' and he also talked of trees still waking up and of Ents falling asleep (II, 88ff). This may well indicate that the elves woke the Ents from slumber and would account, among other reasons, for Treebeard's respectful attitude toward them (II, 95). As for the Gandalf citation, there are three possible explanations: there may have been a temporary slip of memory, perhaps the result of his fight with the Balrog, as suggested by (II, 125); or he may have glossed over some facts in order to impress on Theoden the ancientness of the personage he was going to meet, a not unknown trait of Gandalf's; or he may be referring to the type of experience the hobbits had with the Old Forest (I, 156f) when the trees attacked the High Hay, that is, the trees moving about under their own power. None of the three is satisfactory in explaining the entire quotation.

Finally, the hobbits have not been left out since, during the Entmoot, they were included in the Ents' list (II, 244):

'Ents the earthborn, old as mountains,
the wide-walkers, water drinking;
and hungary as hunters, the Hobbit children,
the laughing-folk, the little people,

and considering the order when compared with the old list, this possibly means that hobbits were around longer than Men, although their origins have been lost (I, 20f).

We may, then, say that the genesis of the races in Middle-earth occurred in the following order: Tom Bombadil, who is unique as well as eldest; then, following the revised list of the Ents: Elves, Dwarves, Ents, Hobbits, and Men.

(My thanks to Ardythe Packer for some very helpful suggestions.)